

EXPLORING AHTHEHNJWEH: CORE VALUES AND SIGNIFICANCE IN TIGUN TRADITION

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Abstract

This study examined the cultural significance of the Ahthehnjweh (Barkcloth) apprenticeship system within the Tigun community of Kurmi LGA, Taraba State. Anchored on the Experiential Learning Theory, the research explored how cultural skills are acquired and transmitted through traditional apprenticeship methods. A purposive sample of 120 participants was engaged, with data collected using Key Informant Interviews and a structured questionnaire. Analysis of the data revealed that the majority of respondents regard Ahthehnjweh as highly significant to Tigun cultural identity, with 35.8% rating it “very important” and 29.2% as “extremely important.” Findings also highlighted concerns over declining youth participation, influenced by modernisation and limited awareness. The study concludes that the Ahthehnjweh apprenticeship system remains a culturally vital practice and recommends the establishment of structured cultural education and intergenerational training programs to ensure its preservation for future generations.

Keywords: Ahthehnjweh, Barkcloth, Apprenticeship, Tigun, Taraba State

Introduction

Traditional clothing represents a vital aspect of cultural heritage and identity, reflecting the artistry, beliefs, and values of a people. It forms part of the broader culture-based industry that drives local economic growth through the preservation and commercialisation of indigenous crafts (Akhir et al., 2018; Jumriani et al., 2021). Across Africa and Asia, traditional textiles have contributed significantly to local economies, with notable examples from Nigeria, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Ismail et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021).

In Nigeria, various regions are recognised for their unique fabrics, such as Akwete in Abia State, Aso-Oke among the Yoruba, and Okene cloth in Kogi State (Ibeto & Ogunduyile, 2015). Among the Tigun people of Kurmi LGA, the Ahthehnjweh (barkcloth) stands as a distinctive traditional attire that has been produced and worn for over two centuries. Crafted from the beaten trunk of a rainforest tree, Ahthehnjweh serves ceremonial, social, and cultural functions while symbolising identity and status within the community (Nguyen & Parker, 2021).

The process of producing Ahthehnjweh is deeply rooted in traditional apprenticeship systems, where skills are transmitted through hands-on learning from master craftsmen (Anderson & Nieves, 2020; Prak & Wallis, 2019). However, unlike other traditional fabrics that have evolved into modern industrial products, such as Indonesia's Batik (Kristianto et al., 2021), the Ahthehnjweh craft has remained static, relying on outdated tools and methods. This stagnation, coupled with a decline in the number of trained craftsmen, poses a serious threat to the continuity of the art form.

Despite numerous studies on traditional textiles and apprenticeship training (Akinbileje, 2014; Ibeo & Ogunduyile, 2015; Segbefia, 2020), little scholarly attention has been given to the

Ahthehnjweh apprenticeship system of the Tigon people. Given the need to preserve cultural heritage while promoting skill-based education, this study examines the challenges facing the Ahthehnjweh (barkcloth) apprenticeship system in the Tigon culture of Kurmi LGA, Taraba State. Ahthehnjweh, the traditional barkcloth of the Tigon people in Kurmi Local Government Area of Taraba State, is a vital symbol of cultural identity and craftsmanship. Yet, its production techniques have remained unchanged for centuries. The traditional apprenticeship system, responsible for transmitting these skills, is now struggling to meet modern educational and industrial demands due to its limited integration with theoretical knowledge and contemporary practices. As a result, there is a steady decline in the number of skilled craftsmen and reduced interest among younger generations, threatening the survival of this heritage craft. Despite the cultural and economic significance of Ahthehnjweh, research attention to its apprenticeship system remains minimal, necessitating an in-depth study to identify the challenges it faces and explore sustainable strategies for its preservation and modernisation.

In light of the foregoing, this study seeks to investigate the cultural significance and values of *Ahthehnjweh* among the Tigon people of Kurmi Local Government Area, Taraba State. It aims to understand how this traditional barkcloth reflects the community's identity, beliefs, and heritage, and how its cultural relevance can be preserved and promoted in contemporary society.

Literature Review

Barkcloth (*Ahthehnjweh*)

Barkcloth making is an ancient textile art traditionally practised and passed down through generations of men. It predates woven cloth and is produced from the inner bark of specific trees, especially from the *Ficus* and *Artocarpus* species (Richards & Matthews, 2021). The fabric holds deep cultural and historical significance across Africa, particularly in Uganda, where it has been recognised by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Venkatraman & Scott, 2018). Barkcloth is historically linked with royalty, status, and ceremonial occasions (Nakazibwe, 2005). Its production involves careful bark harvesting, soaking, beating, and drying to produce a soft, reddish-brown fabric used for clothing, rituals, and art (Venkatraman et al., 2020; Rwawiire et al., 2013). However, the introduction of woven textiles in the 19th century reduced its importance and threatened the continuity of the craft (Nakazibwe, 2005; Rwawiire & Tomkova, 2014).

Types, Materials, and Processing Procedures

Different regions produce distinct varieties of barkcloth, including Uganda's *Lubugo*, Fiji's *Masi*, Tonga's *Ngatu*, and Polynesian *Tapa* cloth (Kooijman, 1988). Despite variations in technique and design, all forms share a reliance on the bast fibre of trees such as *Ficus natalensis*, *Broussonetia papyrifera*, and *Artocarpus altilis*. The process begins with harvesting the inner bark during the wet season when it is more pliable. The bark is soaked, softened, and beaten with grooved wooden mallets to stretch and flatten the fibres into a textile-like form (Trowell & Wachsmann, 1953; Schoenewolf, 1999). The finished fabric is sun-dried and often decorated with dyes or natural pigments to enhance its appearance and symbolic meaning.

The Role of Barkcloth in African Cultures

Before woven textiles, barkcloth served as the primary clothing material across tropical regions (Vargyas, 2016). In many African societies, including the Buganda of Uganda, it symbolised prestige and was worn by royalty during important ceremonies (Nakazibwe, 2005).

Today, artists and designers in Uganda and other regions are reviving barkcloth as a medium for fashion, art, and sustainable design (Adams, 2015; Robertson, 2015; Worden, 2016). In the Tigun community of Kurmi Local Government Area in Taraba State, Nigeria, Ahthehnjweh has been produced for over two centuries from the *Toh Ahthehnjweh* tree. It represents heritage, identity, and social status, while also holding potential for industrial development and youth empowerment (Nguyen & Parker, 2021). The transformation of similar traditional fabrics such as Indonesian Batik into global industrial products highlights the potential for Ahthehnjweh to evolve into a sustainable cultural and economic enterprise (Kristianto et al., 2021; Sunarya, 2018).

The Apprenticeship System

Apprenticeship is a traditional method of skill transmission that combines hands-on experience with mentorship from a master craftsman (Gyamwodie, 2020; Afshar et al., 2022). It provides structured, long-term training that equips learners with occupational competence and practical knowledge (ILO, 2017; UNESCO, 2015). Scholars describe apprenticeship as both workplace-based and educational, emphasising its importance in preparing young people for self-employment (Fudenberg & Rayo, 2019; Young, 2019; Deissinger, 2019). In Nigeria, apprenticeship systems are common among groups such as the Igbo, Nupe, and Tigun, where indigenous knowledge and trade skills are passed across generations (Olulu & Udeorah, 2018). The system typically exists in three forms: traditional, informal, and modern. The traditional and informal models, which dominate rural settings like Kurmi, rely heavily on family-based or community-based mentorship (Adeyeye et al., 2015). Apprentices contribute labour while learning, creating a mutually beneficial relationship with the master craftsman (Mokyr, 2019; Prak & Wallis, 2019).

In contemporary Nigeria, apprenticeship contributes significantly to youth empowerment in trades such as tailoring, welding, mechanics, and fashion design. However, despite its relevance, apprenticeship in traditional crafts like Ahthehnjweh production faces challenges related to modernisation, market access, and knowledge preservation. Strengthening this system could enhance youth employment, cultural sustainability, and the creative economy in the Tigun community and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) developed by Kolb (1984). The theory is considered most appropriate for this research because it emphasises the importance of learning through experience, which aligns closely with the apprenticeship system of Ahthehnjweh (barkcloth) production among the Tigun people. ELT views learning as a continuous process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.

According to Kolb, the learning cycle involves four interrelated stages. The first stage is Concrete Experience (CE), where apprentices acquire hands-on skills by observing and actively participating in the production process. The second stage is Reflective Observation (RO), during which apprentices reflect on their experiences, identify difficulties, and analyse the methods used by their mentors. The third stage, Abstract Conceptualisation (AC), allows learners to form general ideas and principles from their reflections, enabling them to understand patterns and techniques underlying the craft. Finally, in Active Experimentation (AE), apprentices apply their acquired knowledge creatively, experimenting with new approaches to refine their skills and contribute innovations to the traditional art.

The theory is highly relevant to the Ahthehnjweh apprenticeship system because the craft depends on *direct participation, practice, and mentorship*. Through these processes, learning occurs in a dynamic cycle of doing, reflecting, conceptualising, and experimenting. ELT also emphasises how individual creativity, learning styles, and cultural context shape the mastery of traditional skills, making it an ideal framework for understanding how indigenous knowledge in Ahthehnjweh production is transmitted, preserved, and adapted over time.

Empirical Review

Chukwu et al. (2024) investigated the challenges and prospects of the Igbo apprenticeship system in Enugu State using a descriptive survey design. Data were collected from 163 respondents across major business clusters, including Ogbete, Kenyetta, Timber, Artisans, and Gariki markets. Using chi-square and regression analysis, the study revealed significant challenges, such as non-settlement of apprentices, but also noted substantial prospects for the system's sustainability. It recommended policy interventions to ensure fairness and structured settlement processes between masters and apprentices.

Okoye (2023) examined apprenticeship systems and human capital development in Jos Metropolis, Plateau State, employing a survey design grounded in systems theory. A sample of 371 respondents was selected through purposive and random sampling. Descriptive statistics and linear regression analyses showed that, despite its informal structure, apprenticeship significantly enhances human capital development. The study advocated for the formalisation of apprenticeship curricula, integration with conventional education, and provision of grants to graduate trainees to support entrepreneurship.

Tata (2019) explored informal apprenticeship training in aluminium pot foundries at Old Panteka Market, Kaduna, using a case study approach. Through structured interviews and group discussions, analysed via simple frequencies and percentages, the study found that most apprentices were self-sponsored youths, often forced to quit due to financial difficulties. Training relied heavily on observation, had no fixed duration, and ended without certification. The study concluded that the system requires modernisation and better institutional support.

Similarly, Adeyeye et al. (2015) assessed the contribution of apprenticeship to skill development in Nigeria's printing sector using a descriptive research method and Structural Equation Modelling (AMOS 22). Based on 564 valid responses from employees across Lagos, findings showed that apprenticeship significantly improves skill acquisition, emphasising the importance of mentoring, education level, and on-the-job learning.

Summary of the Empirical Review

The reviewed studies collectively demonstrate that apprenticeship systems remain vital to skill acquisition and human capital development in Nigeria, despite structural, financial, and institutional challenges. Chukwu et al. (2024) and Okoye (2023) underscored the need for policy reform and curriculum integration, while Tata (2019) highlighted the unstructured nature and financial obstacles of informal training. Adeyeye et al. (2015) confirmed that apprenticeship positively influences skill development through practical and mentor-based learning.

Building on these insights, the present study contributes to existing scholarship by examining the Ahthehnjweh apprenticeship system among the Tigon people of Kurmi Local Government Area, Taraba State. It focuses on the cultural relevance, transmission process, and sustainability of this traditional craft, an area that remains largely unexplored in academic literature.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design to examine the apprenticeship system of *Ahthehnjweh* (barkcloth) within the Tigun culture of Kurmi Local Government Area, Taraba State. This design was appropriate for collecting data that described existing practices, perceptions, and challenges associated with the apprenticeship system. The study population consisted of 120 respondents, including community stakeholders, master craftsmen, and apprentices directly involved in *Ahthehnjweh* production. Given the small and accessible population, a purposive total population sampling technique was used to ensure comprehensive coverage and eliminate sampling error, allowing all relevant participants to contribute to the study.

Two instruments were employed: a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire captured quantitative data on demographics, skill acquisition, participation factors, and challenges.

The interview guide elicited qualitative insights on training structure, cultural significance, and sustainability of the apprenticeship system.

Validity and Reliability: The instruments were validated by experts from the Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. A pilot study using the test-retest method produced Cronbach's Alpha scores ranging from 0.74 to 0.83, confirming the instruments' reliability and internal consistency.

Data Collection Procedure: Data were gathered through both questionnaire administration and in-depth interviews to allow for triangulation. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

Method of Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages), while qualitative responses from interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. This dual approach provided a holistic understanding of the *Ahthehnjweh* apprenticeship system, integrating measurable trends with deeper cultural insights.

Results Discussions

The data collected through the structured questionnaire are presented in this section, highlighting the responses of participants across various demographic categories, their involvement in the *Ahthehnjweh* apprenticeship system, the challenges they face, and their perceptions regarding the preservation and cultural significance of the craft.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 120 respondents involved in the *Ahthehnjweh* apprenticeship system. The findings indicate a fairly balanced gender distribution, with males (55.8%) slightly outnumbering females (44.2%). Most respondents were young adults aged 18–25 years (33.3%) and 26–35 years (30.0%), suggesting strong youth participation and continuity in the craft. In terms of education, the majority had primary (35.8%) or tertiary education (25.0%), while 20.0% had no formal schooling, reflecting the informal and traditional nature of the apprenticeship system. The participants included stakeholders (40.0%), master craftsmen (35.0%), and apprentices (25.0%), ensuring representation across all key groups in the production process. Regarding years of involvement, 35.8% had practised for 1–3 years, while 15.0% indicated family-based participation, demonstrating both emerging and generational engagement in *Ahthehnjweh* production. Overall, the demographic profile reveals a youthful, diverse, and culturally grounded population that sustains the continuity of this traditional craft.

Table 1: Demographic data of respondents Source: Field survey, 2024

S/N	Variable	Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Gender	Male	67	55.8%
		Female	53	44.2%
2	Age	18–25	40	33.3%
		26–35	36	30.0%
		36–45	24	20.0%
		46 and above	20	16.7%
3	Educational Qualification	No formal education	24	20.0%
		Primary education	43	35.8%
		Secondary education	23	19.2%
		Tertiary education	30	25.0%
4	Role in Apprenticeship System	Apprentice	30	25.0%
		Master craftsman	42	35.0%
		Stakeholder	48	40.0%
5	Years in <i>Ahthehnjweh</i> Production	Less than 1 year	36	30.0%
		1–3 years	43	35.8%
		More than 7 years	23	19.2%
		Family tradition	18	15.0%
		Total	120	100%

Table 2 presents respondents' perceptions of the cultural significance of the *Ahthehnjweh* craft to the Tigun people and the strategies preferred for its preservation. The data indicate that the craft holds substantial cultural value. The majority of respondents rated it as very important (35.8%) or extremely important (29.2%), together accounting for nearly two-thirds of the sample. Twenty percent considered it moderately important, while smaller proportions viewed it as slightly important (10.0%) or not important (5.0%). These results confirm that the *Ahthehnjweh* craft is deeply embedded in Tigun cultural identity.

Regarding preservation strategies, cultural education was the most endorsed approach (30.0%), reflecting the belief that transmitting traditional knowledge to younger generations is essential for sustainability. Financial support followed (25.0%), indicating recognition of the economic dimension in maintaining the practice. Modernising techniques were preferred by 20.0% of respondents, suggesting openness to integrating innovation with tradition. Increasing awareness was selected by 19.2%, emphasising the importance of public visibility and appreciation, while other strategies were less frequently cited (5.8%).

Table 2: Responses to Perceptions and Cultural Significance Source: Field Survey, 2024

S/N	Item Description	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Rank
1	How important is the <i>Ahthehnjweh</i> craft to Tigun culture?	Not important	6	5.0%	5
		Slightly important	12	10.0%	4
		Moderately important	24	20.0%	3
		Very important	43	35.8%	1
		Extremely important	35	29.2%	2
2	Best way to preserve the <i>Ahthehnjweh</i> craft	Cultural education	36	30.0%	1
		Financial support	30	25.0%	2
		Modernizing techniques	24	20.0%	3
		Increasing awareness	23	19.2%	4
		Other	7	5.8%	5
		Total	120	100.0%	

Overall, the findings highlight that the *Ahthehnjweh* craft is highly valued culturally, and its preservation requires a combination of educational, financial, and adaptive strategies to ensure the continuity and relevance of the apprenticeship system within the Tigun community.

Cultural Significance of Ahthehnjweh and Preservation Efforts

To gain deeper insights into the cultural significance of *Ahthehnjweh* and strategies for its preservation, in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants, including master craftsmen and cultural stakeholders. The findings revealed that *Ahthehnjweh* plays a central role in traditional attire, serving as a key symbol of cultural identity within the Tigun community. It was also reported to have ritual functions, being integral to ceremonies and other cultural practices, highlighting its enduring cultural relevance.

In terms of preservation, respondents identified several approaches. Some emphasised the role of annual cultural festivals in promoting awareness and sustaining the craft, while others highlighted the importance of continuous apprenticeship and skills transfer as crucial for maintaining the tradition. These findings indicate a strong commitment to preserving *Ahthehnjweh*, while underscoring the need for structured and sustained efforts to ensure its long-term survival.

The findings of this study indicate that the *Ahthehnjweh* craft holds profound cultural significance within the Tigun community. Respondents highlighted that the craft extends beyond traditional attire to serve essential cultural and ritual functions, reflecting its central role in shaping community identity and values. This aligns with Giddens (2002), who argues that cultural practices act as markers of communal identity and continuity. The symbolic and ritualistic functions of *Ahthehnjweh* contribute to its sustained relevance, even amidst modern influences.

However, the study also revealed that socio-economic factors, particularly the economic viability of the apprenticeship system, present significant challenges to the craft's continuity. Some interviewees described the practice as being primarily "for keeping sack," indicating its preservation is largely cultural rather than economically motivated. Consequently, the limited financial appeal of *Ahthehnjweh* apprenticeship reduces its attractiveness as a career path, potentially impacting the long-term sustainability of the craft among emerging generations.

Conclusion And Recommendation

The study concludes that the *Ahthehnjweh* apprenticeship system remains a vital cultural tradition among the Tigon people, with 65% of respondents acknowledging it as either "very" or "extremely important." Despite its cultural significance, participation in the system is declining due to economic constraints, modern social influences, and limited interest among youth. The findings highlight that while the traditional structure has preserved the craft historically, additional measures are required to ensure its continuity and relevance in contemporary society.

To preserve the cultural significance of *Ahthehnjweh*, it is recommended that a structured program combining intergenerational apprenticeship with cultural education and community-led initiatives be established. This approach will ensure the transmission of skills and knowledge, strengthen the craft's cultural value, and encourage youth participation, thereby safeguarding the tradition for future generations.

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